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Speech and Language Differences Among Dialects

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Bilingualism and multiculturalism are common in the classroom. A speech-language pathologist (SLP) must be able to distinguish between a language disorder and a language difference.

A language difference results from a regional, cultural, or ethnic dialect of a language. A student who is learning English as a second (or third, etc.) language may have differences in English speech and language that result from the influence of his or her primary language. For example, plural nouns are not marked in the Mandarin language, so a child learning English might not produce plural nouns (e.g. pens) in English.

These differences should not be considered a speech or language disorder. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), “no dialectal variety of American English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language” (1993).

For information related to specific languages, including phonemic inventories and cultural and linguistic information, please visit <https://www.asha.org/practice/multicultural/phono/>.

While language differences are not treated by an SLP as a disorder, elective services are available for those wishing to become more proficient in Standard American English. It is important, however, that the elective speech and language services “emphasize the appropriateness of the first and second dialects for different contexts” (ASHA, 2003).



Resources:

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (1993). Definitions of communication disorders and variations [Relevant Paper]. Accessed 5/19/2023 from <https://www.asha.org/policy/rp1993-00208/>
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2003). American English dialects [Technical Report]. Access 5/19/2023. Available from <https://www.asha.org/policy/tr2003-00044/>
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.) Phonemic inventories and cultural and linguistic information across languages. Accessed 5/19/2023. Available from <https://www.asha.org/practice/multicultural/phono/>

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