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Minding the Gap Part One: English Language Learners

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During the 2012-2013 school year, there were 4.85 million English Language Learners (ELLs) in the US public school system. Experts project that ELLs will make up 40% of the school-aged population in the US by the year 2030. Some parts of the country are already reporting that between 60%-70% of students speak a primary language (L1) other than English. This increase does not appear to be leveling off or decreasing anytime soon. Factors such as age and amount of formal education affect how a student acquires English. These factors can make it challenging to determine whether difficulty in the classroom is due to a language-learning disability or typical of second language acquisition. Students acquiring a second language (L2) may also demonstrate similar patterns seen in students with a learning disability.



While acquiring a second language a student may experience:



• **Silent Period:** The time in which a student speaks very little and focuses on listening and comprehending a new language. A younger student (i.e., preschool age) may remain in the Silent Period for a year or more, but an older student's Silent Period may only last a few weeks or months.



• **Interference/Transfer:** A student may transfer rules from L1 to English, creating an error in meaning, pragmatics, or grammar.



• **Codeswitching:** A student may alternate between L1 and English when talking.



• **Interlanguage:** A student may develop a form of language inconsistent with L1 and English. In other words, "interlanguage" is a student's best attempt to apply order and structure to the competing language systems.



• **Language Loss:** When a student has limited opportunities to practice L1, some loss of skill or fluency may occur.

Learning disabled students and students learning a second language may:



- demonstrate a short attention span
- appear distracted/confused
- gesture more than speaking



- use single words/phrases
- comment inappropriately



- demonstrate poor recall/comprehension
- display weak vocabulary/syntax
- have difficulty sequencing ideas/events

Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) play a key role in determining whether these patterns are consistent with a language learning disability or typical of second language acquisition. Students may exhibit patterns that are not consistent with typical language development in L1. These patterns do not indicate a language impairment.

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Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are the language skills required for meaningful social interaction such as talking to peers in the cafeteria or playing on the playground. These skills usually develop within six months to two years after a student begins learning a second language.



Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

Cognitive Academic Language is the language needed for academic and professional success related to listening, learning, reading, and writing. On average, it takes 5-7 years to obtain “academic English,” which allows the student to compare and contrast, classify, evaluate, infer, and synthesize information presented in the classroom or read in a textbook.



Minding the BICS–CALP Gap

As students get older, the context of academic tasks decreases, and the cognitive demand increases. Research shows that the amount of schooling a student receives in L1 directly relates to the speed of English language learning. A student learning English as a second language typically develops the social language (BICS) used in conversations quickly, but struggles to develop the academic language (CALP) used in the classroom at the same pace. A student assumed to be proficient in English often performs poorly on standardized assessments when measured against English speaking peers. While a student’s social language may appear fluent and adequate in everyday conversation, professionals can often misinterpret the gap between social and academic language as a language-learning disability. Misidentifying these students can lead to unnecessary services, thereby decreasing access to appropriate curriculum and social issues. Speech-Language Pathologists play a large role in minding the gap by conducting thorough evaluations of English Language Learners in order to appropriately identify their cognitive and academic potential.



Be on the lookout for helpful strategies and assessment modifications for effective English Language Learning evaluations in [Minding the Gap: Part Two \(Handy Handout #450\)](#).

Related Handy Handouts®:

- [450 – Minding the Gap Part Two: English Language Learners](#)
- [58 – Communication and the Bilingual Child](#)
- [142 – Teaching Second Language Students In the Mainstream Classroom](#)

Resources:

- What You Need to Know about ELLs: Fast Facts by Lydia Breiseth retrieved 7/27/16 from www.colorincolorado.org
- Pre-production and the Silent Period by Judie Haynes retrieved 7/27/2016 from www.everythingsl.net
- Acquiring English as a Second Language, What’s “Normal,” What’s not retrieved 7/27/2016 from www.asha.org

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