Working with English Language Learners with Special Needs

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Abstract
English language learners (ELLs) have special needs and often their needs are not met due to misdiagnosis and mismanagement. The reasons for such mismanagement are often the lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge of the practitioners and service providers. In addition, families of such students are often not prepared to provide home support due to lack of English skills and knowledge. To provide an optimal learning environment becomes a huge challenge for educators. The purpose of this paper is to present a fundamental understanding about bilingualism as normative and the relationship between language differences and language disorders. Guidelines for assessment and intervention for working with ELL students and families with special needs will be provided.

Introduction
In recent decades, mobility of the world population has increased tremendously. For instance, the establishment of the European Union has provided a fertile ground for the mobility of individuals from Eastern Europe moving to many different parts of the world. The development of China and India is another example of shifting in manpower and mobility. The need for labor in some countries has also provided the opportunity for many to move from one country to another. In addition to such mobility, immigration laws in different countries have also relaxed, resulting in an influx of large numbers of immigrants. Linguistic and cultural diversity is now a way of life for many. In the United States, the number of immigrants, migrants, refugees and political asylum seekers has continued to rise. The need for learning English is a necessity. In addition, the need to understand individuals with possible language disorders has become more apparent in the last two decades due to such a major shift in populations.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a fundamental understanding about bilingualism as normative and the relationship between language differences and language disorders. Guiding principles for assessment will be discussed. A case study will be used to illustrate the diversity of cases with the purpose of advocating for early detection.

The World of ‘Englishes’
Around the globe, people speak a multitude of languages. There are more than 6000 languages spoken in the world. English is spoken by 1.5 billion people. In many parts of the world, bilingualism/multilingualism is the norm. For example, in Singapore, it is common to find people who speak English, Mandarin, and Malay or Tamil.

According to Crystal (1997), the world of ‘Englishes’ comes in many different forms. ‘Singlish’ is a mixture of English and other languages spoken in Singapore. In this context, the mainstream culture itself is a multilingual environment, being termed as ‘additive bilingualism.’ In another context, bilingualism may be the consequence of
acculturating into the mainstream environment, in which cultural and language immersion occurs and the mainstream is primarily monolingual, which would be termed as ‘subtractive bilingualism’; such are the cases of new immigrants, migrant workers, refugees, and illegal entrants. These experiences are often challenging in unfamiliar and unclear cultural situations due to the limited proficiency in the English of newly arrived immigrants. As a result, they feel marginalized and find it difficult to acculturate into the mainstream culture. Though immigrants of different origins differ linguistically, culturally and socio-economically, they share common characteristics such as their insufficient knowledge and/or use of English (Cheng, 2009).

When the number of immigrants from a particular country or region becomes large, the language differences of those individuals can become a social issue, especially in education. A college student opened fire on the campus of Virginia Tech killing 29 people and then killed himself on April 16, 2007. This Korean American college student came to the United States as an immigrant with his parents. He had exhibited some behavioral problems and received speech therapy treatment while attending school. In his own words, he felt unloved and angry. Some of his college professors were very concerned about his speech, language and overall behavior, but the counselors did not see him as a threat to other students nor to himself. There are many unanswered questions about this unusual and extreme case, but one thing is very clear: teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs), speech language pathologists (SLPs), and counselors need to become more aware of the cultural background of their students/clients and advocate remediation to improve social and communicative skills. For more information, please read Cheng (2007). Though not occurring to this extreme, dissonance between diverse cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds and educational demands is becoming more common, especially in the United States with both Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans.

When assessing ELLs who are suspected of language impairment in such an environment, comparing their language samples to English is crucial since they represent the changing point of what they are learning. In general, most children learn two or three languages in their environment without difficulty and this is normative. However, there are cases that exhibit difficulties in the acquisition of these multiple languages and the following section will describe the process of how we can detect a language disorder in an ELL student.

Case Study

The case of John. Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) or high functioning autism (HFA) have unusual patterns of circumscribed interests, ritualistic behaviors and higher IQ. They have difficulty maintaining attention on things that they are not interested in. They exhibit ‘hyperfocus’ on their self-selected activities and live in their own world. In general, individuals with AS have communication impairment.

This case is about John, an 8th grader who recently moved to the United States from southern Taiwan. John was diagnosed with AS when he was two years old. He was slow in developing speech and stayed away from people. Instead of replying to a question (such as What is your name?), he would repeat the question. His parents provided him with many kinds of therapies and he made some improvement. He also exhibited repetitive movements while trying to explain what he was interested in. He exhibited the
typical behaviors of individuals with AS: social impairment, restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests, abnormal fixations, ritualized behaviors, and stereotypic play and movements. John had selective attention and situational over-activity problems. He was hyperfocused on activities, objects and topics such as the Discovery Channel, Albert Einstein, and the Second World War. He preferred to use role-play to communicate, often insisting on being the anchorperson.

As he grew older, his oral language improved. Although he was able to speak Mandarin clearly, he would speak out loud in class and would only talk about the topics he was interested in, becoming totally absorbed in his own world. He would volunteer answers in class, but his answers were inappropriate. In general, he did not pay attention to what was going on in class. Instead he liked to play with his own fingers or rub the eraser repeatedly on his desk.

John began to learn English when he moved to the United States with his parents. He entered 7th grade as an ELL student and his parents employed a tutor to help him with English. In the beginning, his handwriting was slow and laborious and he would omit some letters in his words. He would make the same mistakes over and over again, such as ‘well’ for ‘will’ and ‘there’ for ‘their.’ On the other hand, John learned to read in English and enjoyed reading books related to history and detectives. He liked to share his opinions about the stories and retell the stories.

The tutor went to his school for a visit in order to observe his behaviors in the classroom. During the school observation, John was found to be alone and talking to himself. He did not pay much attention in class and was quiet and had no interaction with his peers. During class, he would become distracted and looked at the floor or played with his fingers or eraser. When the topics in class were of his interest, he would pay attention. When he liked the content, he would nod his head with a smile and provide the correct answer. When the teacher asked the class to take notes, John would only look at the blackboard.

John had poor editing skills, poor and slow writing, and paid minimum attention to punctuation and spelling. He required a much longer amount of time to complete his writing tasks; however, writing was an activity that greatly enhanced John’s language. At home, his tutor was able to get him engaged in joint attention by discovering what he was interested in. John was interested in listening to the CBS news and he would imitate the reporter and also provide the correct answers to the content. John could remember the songs that he had only heard twice. In the beginning, John was not able to spell whole words without missing some letters. The tutor used the cut-and-paste methods by helping him fill in the blanks. Also, the tutor tried to find out what subjects he liked. Once the tutor found out that he liked Albert Einstein, she looked for information about this scientist and used the material to keep his attention. His tutor found out that John was also interested in the following topics: festivals such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, movies, TV programs, and singing.

The tutor kept a teaching journal to record observations of his reactions to the various teaching strategies. In addition, the tutor kept a dialogue journal of all the dialogues at the end of each session. A portfolio was kept and over time John began to make fewer mistakes. The tutor and John read stories together and talked about the plot and shared their opinions. John could use the sentence patterns as models and apply the models to his expression and writing. Teaching methods were adjusted based on these
data. In summary, John (a person with AS) was able to learn English and became bilingual and bi-literate through language intervention.

Many ELL students are at risk for educational failure due to their language background and not because of language impairment. At the same time, students who grow up in linguistically and/or culturally diverse households that are ethnic, bilingual, or both, are not more vulnerable to specific disabilities in language learning than monolingual children. Consequently, professionals must be able to distinguish between language differences, which are the result of a student’s linguistic and/or cultural environment, and language disorders, which are due to an impairment of language-learning mechanisms.

**Do Not Blame it on Bilingualism**

ELL students may exhibit some of the behaviors listed below when they enter the U.S. classroom.

1. Lack of vocabulary development
2. Delay in knowledge gain
3. Difficulty in articulation
4. Lack of interest in communication
5. Lack of joint attention
6. Lack of gazing
7. Lack of gestures
8. Slow response time
9. Lack of nonverbal communication

These could be misinterpreted as red flags or considered common for beginners.

**How Can We Tell a Language Difference from a Language Disorder?**

**Red Flags to Watch for**

When an ELL student enters school, her/his information is recorded in the cumulative file. If s/he is unintelligible, a red flag is raised. Comments such as the following – the student is learning two languages and it will take the student longer to learn, so even if the student is a bit delayed, the student will catch up – do not help when an ELL student displays signs that deviate from bilingual acquisition patterns. Appropriate probing questions must be asked. For example:

1. Do the student’s parents understand her/him?
2. Do the student’s siblings understand her/him?
3. Who does the student play with?
4. If the student has playmates, do they understand her/him?
5. What does the student like to do?
6. What does the student like to play?
7. Can anyone understand the student?
8. What does the student like to eat?
9. Who are the significant people in the student’s environment?
10. Describe a typical day.

One important indicator of a language disorder is when neither the student’s parents nor siblings understand the student. Another important indicator is when the
student has no playmates and is often found playing alone. Further, playing behaviors will give clues to the possible communicative disorder.

Assessment
Here are some fundamental guiding principles in assessment:

1. A child with a language disorder experiences difficulties in both the mother tongue and another language (including school language). The problem lies in the ability to process linguistic signals rather than multiple language exposure.
2. A child with a language disorder can learn two or three languages; in other words, the issue of learning two or three languages is not how many but how.
3. Languages are not learned in a vacuum and they are best learned in a language rich environment.
4. ‘Superficial and initial difficulties’ in learning the school language do not result in a language disorder later on.
5. A child with a language disorder secondary to developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder behaves similarly in different language environments whether bilingual, monolingual, or mixed.
6. ‘Foreign language influenced accents’ can present a challenge and the lack of intelligibility, which can be viewed as not smart or not intelligent.

Conclusion
Amy Tan, author of The Joy Luck Club (1989), explains in an essay titled Mother Tongue that she "began to write stories using all the Englishes [she] grew up with.” For monolinguals, the different Englishes may mean the English used in schools or formal settings (formal English); the English used for everyday conversation (informal or casual English); the English used among close friends (intimate English); the English used among gang members (coded English); or the English used in cyberspace (cyber English). But for our ELLs, this is not the same situation. Tan described four types of Englishes: "broken English" that her mother speaks, "water-down English" that Tan translates for her mother from Chinese, "simple English" that Tan uses with her mother, and "English" translated from her mother’s Chinese that captures her communicative intent. Understanding the process of learning English and the many forms of Englishes as well as the differences between language disorders and language differences will assist teachers of ELLs in providing optimal English language learning experiences for their learners (Cheng, 2009).

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