

When ELLs Struggle: Recognizing the Signs

It is important for educators who are screening English language learners (ELLs) for learning difficulties to consider that some behaviors that are considered signs of a learning disability also resemble linguistic behaviors of students learning a second language (L2). In addition, the behaviors may reflect cultural differences or values of students coming to U.S. schools from other countries and educational systems.

The following table highlights examples of similarities between possible linguistic, cultural, and learning disability (LD) explanations for behaviors demonstrated by ELLs. The list is not comprehensive, nor should it be used as a diagnostic tool, particularly since not all students with LD exhibit the same learning difficulties. Rather, it is a starting point for conversations regarding students having difficulty. We urge you to explore other potential explanations for learning difficulties based on what you know about your own students.

Student Behavior	Potential Language Explanations (Limited L2 proficiency)	Potential Cultural Explanations	Potential LD Explanations
School Expectations			
Social Interaction Student has trouble interacting with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peers (taking turns, interpreting body language and behavior, etc.) • Teachers (asking questions and voicing needs, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student may not understand peer / teacher conversations, questions, etc. 	Different cultural norms regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch • Proximity • Eye contact • Signs of respect • Teacher's authority 	Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language processing • Auditory processing • Oral processing • Abstract reasoning
Emotional Student feels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustrated • Withdrawn • Anxious 	Student may be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggling to communicate • Feel overwhelmed or tired by the demands of learning a new language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student is adjusting to a new cultural environment • Student feels stress due to current or previous situations and instability (especially refugees and migrants) 	Student may: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that he/she is falling behind • Feel unsuccessful
In the Classroom			
Time Student has trouble: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting deadlines • Finishing work on time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student has limited comprehension skills and may not understand assignment or expectations 	Different cultural norms regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management • Deadlines 	Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • Memory
Classroom Activities Student has trouble: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following directions • Working in a group • Paying attention • Concentrating • Finishing tasks • Participating in classroom discourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student has limited comprehension skills and may not understand activity • Student has limited access to scaffolding and support (visuals, demonstrations, etc.) 	Different cultural norms regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing contradicting opinions • Group vs. independent work • Gender roles 	Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auditory processing • Language processing • Sequencing • Focusing • Prioritizing • Cause & effect
Testing Student does poorly on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summative assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited understanding of content due to unfamiliarity with L2 what he/she knows in L2 	Different cultural norms regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing-taking skills • Sharing work vs. cheating 	Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language processing • Expressing and organizing ideas

Student Behavior	Language Explanations (Limited L2 proficiency)	Cultural Explanations	LD Explanations
Language Skills / Proficiency			
Reading Student has trouble: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mastering sound-symbol relationship Rhyming Recognizing sight words Learning new words Comprehending text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student is unfamiliar with phonetic rules and patterns of L2 Student has limited literacy skills in L1 	Student has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different cultural experiences and references than those presented in reading material 	Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language processing
Writing Student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is reluctant to write Has trouble expressing, organizing, and developing ideas Makes frequent grammatical errors Speaks more fluidly than he/she writes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student hasn't learned a variety of structures and vocabulary in L2 Student is afraid to make mistakes Student's social language is stronger than academic language 	Student has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different cultural experiences and references than those relevant for the assignment 	Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fine motor skills Expressive language
Speaking Student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is silent for long periods of time Has trouble pronouncing words Speaks with frequent pauses and errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student is in silent period Student hasn't learned structures and vocabulary in L2 Student is afraid to make mistakes 	Different cultural norms regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student participation in discussions Expressing contradictory opinions Gender roles 	Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oral language difficulties
Listening Student has trouble: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding spoken directions Remembering what he/she has heard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student has limited aural comprehension skills Student needs extra scaffolding and support (visuals, demonstrations, etc.) 		Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Auditory processing Focusing
Cognition			
Cognitive Skills Student has trouble understanding, remembering, and/or identifying: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New concepts Cause & effect Classifying Summarizing Abstract ideas Idioms & slang 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student has limited academic language skills and background knowledge applicable to new concepts Student has limited reading/listening comprehension skills 		Student may have trouble with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organization Sequencing Abstract reasoning

Adapted from Hamayan et al. (2007) and Klinger et al. (2008).

References

Hamayan, E., Marler, B., Sanchez-Lopez, C, and Damico, J. "Table 3.3: Possible Explanations for Typical Difficulties Encountered by ELLs." *Special Education Considerations for English Language Learners*. (p. 40). Philadelphia: Caslon, Inc.

Klinger, J., Hoover, J., and Baca, L. (2008). "Data-Driven Decision Making in a Multi-Tiered Model." *Why Do English Language Learners Struggle with Reading?* (pp. 79-83). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.